

# **Cerro Grande Fire**

## **May 4 to September 25, 2000**



**The Cerro Grande Fire was the largest and most destructive forest fire ever recorded in New Mexico history. The fire burned during half the spring, the entire summer, and the first days of autumn before it was finally extinguished.**



**May 4**

**The National Park Service began a planned fire on Cerro Grande (Spanish for large hill). About 300–900 acres were to be burned within Bandelier National Monument. But the wind blew, and the fire flared.**



**May 7**

**Slurry bombers and helicopters dropped 1,000 to 3,000 gallons of fire retardant or water at a time in an attempt to control the fire. But the winds increased, and the fire grew to 1,253 acres.**



**May 8**

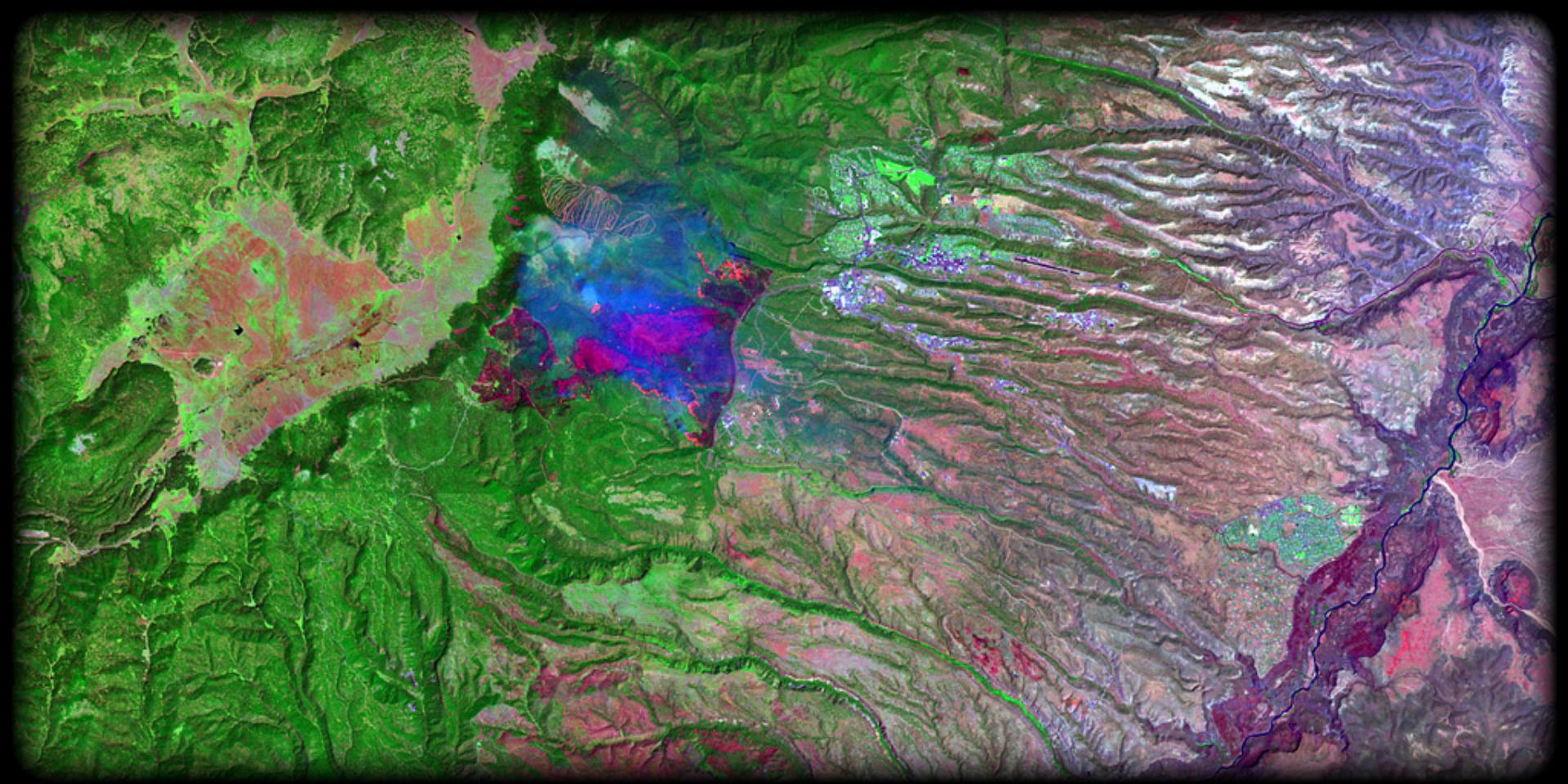
**The fire grew to 2,000 acres. The Laboratory and the county were closed to reduce traffic and keep roads clear for firefighters.**



**May 9**  
**The westernmost areas of Los Alamos  
were evacuated. The county declared  
a state of emergency.**



**Smoke obscured the fire as it approached the Laboratory and townsite in this true color photo taken May 9, 2000, by the Landsat 7 satellite from 427 miles in space.**



**In this infrared image taken at the same time by the satellite, actively burning areas are dark red to bright red; recently burned areas appear black. Vegetation appears bright green. Rangeland or open areas appear pink to light purple. Urban development appears light blue, white, and purple; less densely developed residential areas appear light green.**



**May 10**

**The fire department evacuated the remaining areas of Los Alamos. Winds gusted to 75 miles per hour, and hot embers rained down.**



**The fire engulfed the western and northern parts of Los Alamos. President Clinton declared Los Alamos county a disaster area. The fire grew to 20,000 acres.**

**Capt. Robert Stibbard, Los Alamos Fire Department:**  
**“... a 120-foot tongue of flame rose out of the canyon, dwarfing 80-foot trees. The tongue seemed to build upon itself. . . and we were in the way. So we ran like hell was at our heels.” Once out of immediate danger, the firefighters returned to combat the flames.**



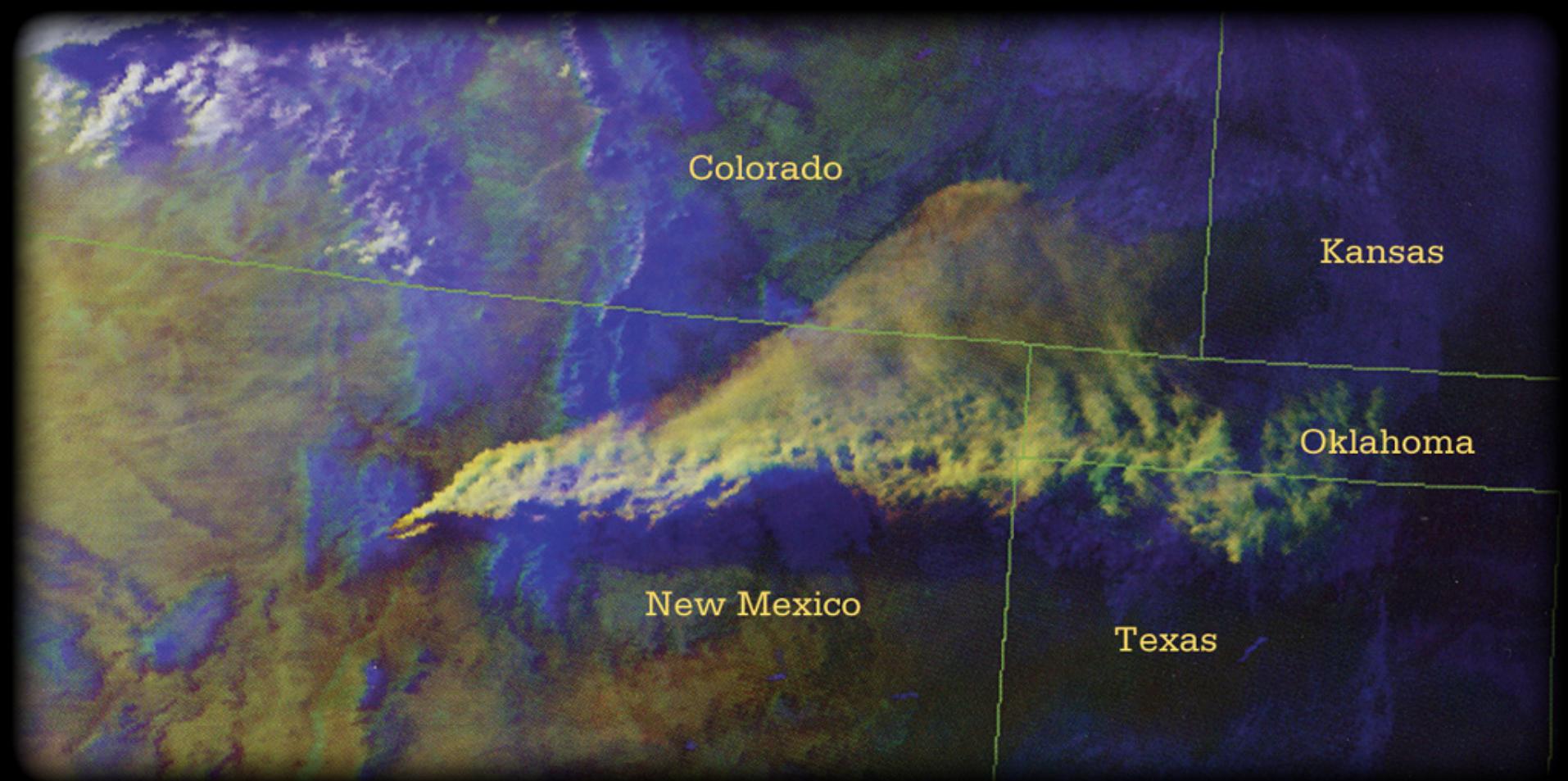
**May 11**

**Nearby White Rock was evacuated at 1 A.M. The fire was threatening Laboratory facilities that, if burned, could have released toxic substances. The fire grew to 33,000 acres.**



**May 11**

**Daybreak revealed the devastation: smoldering, ash-covered foundations; melted windows and tires; twisted metal skeletons of furniture, plumbing, and appliances.**



**May 13**

**Low winds and cooler temperatures helped firefighters to hold the lines. The fire grew to 40,000 acres, and the smoke plume stretched into Colorado, Texas, and Oklahoma.**



**May 14**

**Los Alamos residents whose homes burned were allowed to ride by the ruins. White Rock residents were allowed to return home; no structures burned there. Only 5 percent of the fire was contained.**

**May 15**

**Los Alamos residents were allowed to return;  
354 families had no homes to return to. Outpourings  
of support for the fire victims came from the state,  
nation, and even foreign countries.**



**May 25**

**Finally 100 percent of the fire was contained.  
Many hot spots continued to pose problems  
throughout the dry summer.**

**A total of 2,400 valiant firefighters fought the fire: 1,600 from the U.S. Forest Service, 700 from 66 fire departments throughout New Mexico, and 100 from Los Alamos.**



**Only 3 firefighters sustained minor injuries.  
Fortunately, no human lives were lost. Animal  
control groups rescued more than 700 pets  
and wildlife.**



**The 47,650 acres burned included parts of Los Alamos county, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Baca Ranch, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Santa Clara, and San Ildefonso pueblos. The cost was more than \$1 billion.**



**Thirty-seven million trees burned. In town,  
239 structures were destroyed; at the Laboratory,  
112 small buildings burned. No facilities with  
radioactive or chemical material burned.**



**The fire caused more than \$340 million in damage to the Laboratory alone. Computers were damaged by smoke. Power lines, storage sheds, office trailers, some vehicles, and historic buildings from the Manhattan Project era burned.**



**Work began almost immediately to prevent flooding, to thin trees in unburned areas, to replant grasses and trees, to reconstruct trails, and to rebuild homes and lives.**



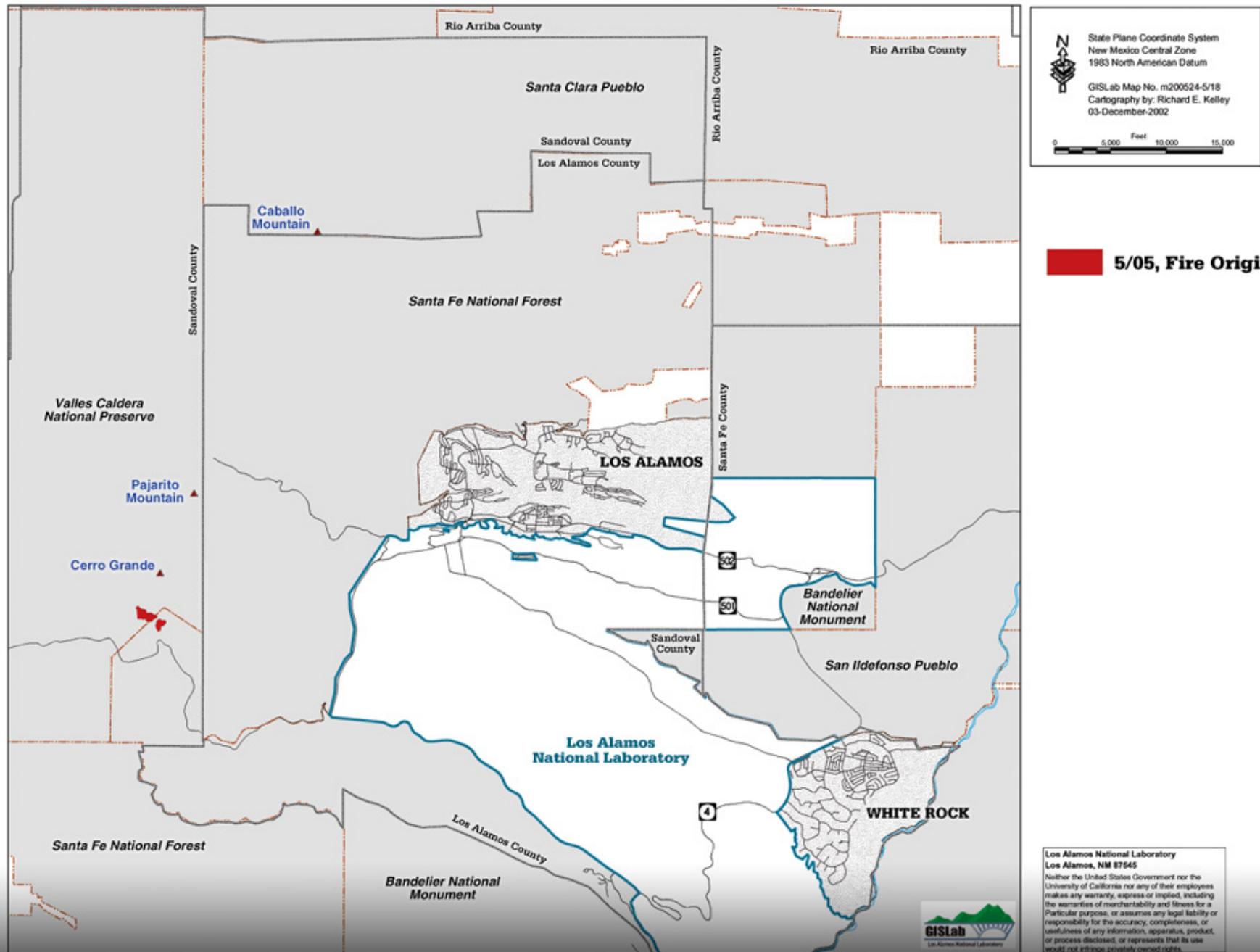
**On September 25, 2000, the U.S. Forest Service declared the Cerro Grande fire was entirely extinguished.**

## The Fire

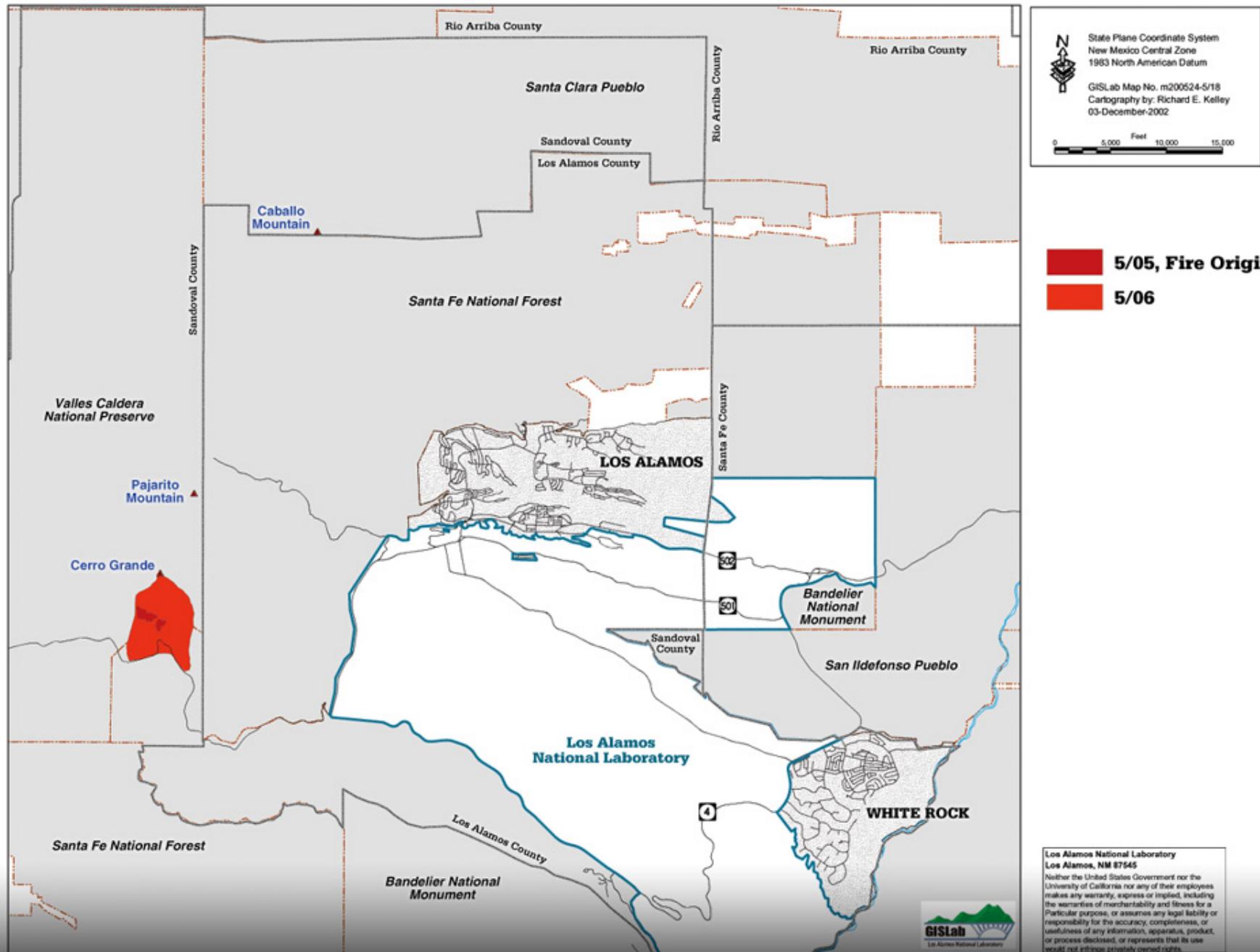
- **47,650 acres burned**
- **320 structures destroyed**
- **Cost \$1 billion**

## The People

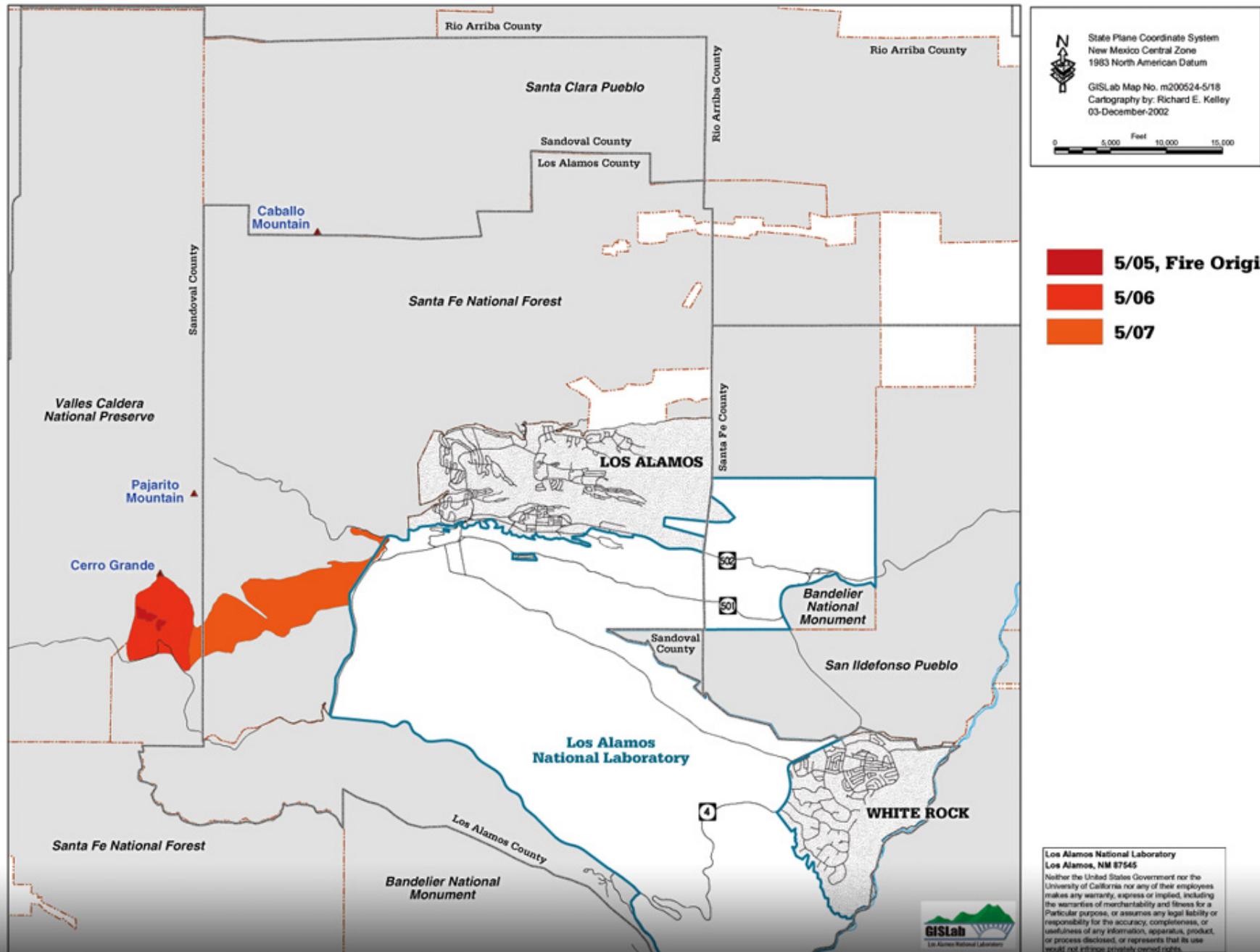
- **18,000 residents evacuated**
- **1,300 National Guard troops, 300 Laboratory guards, and 180 police officers maintained order and security during the evacuation**
- **2,400 firefighters fought the flames**
- **354 families lost their homes**



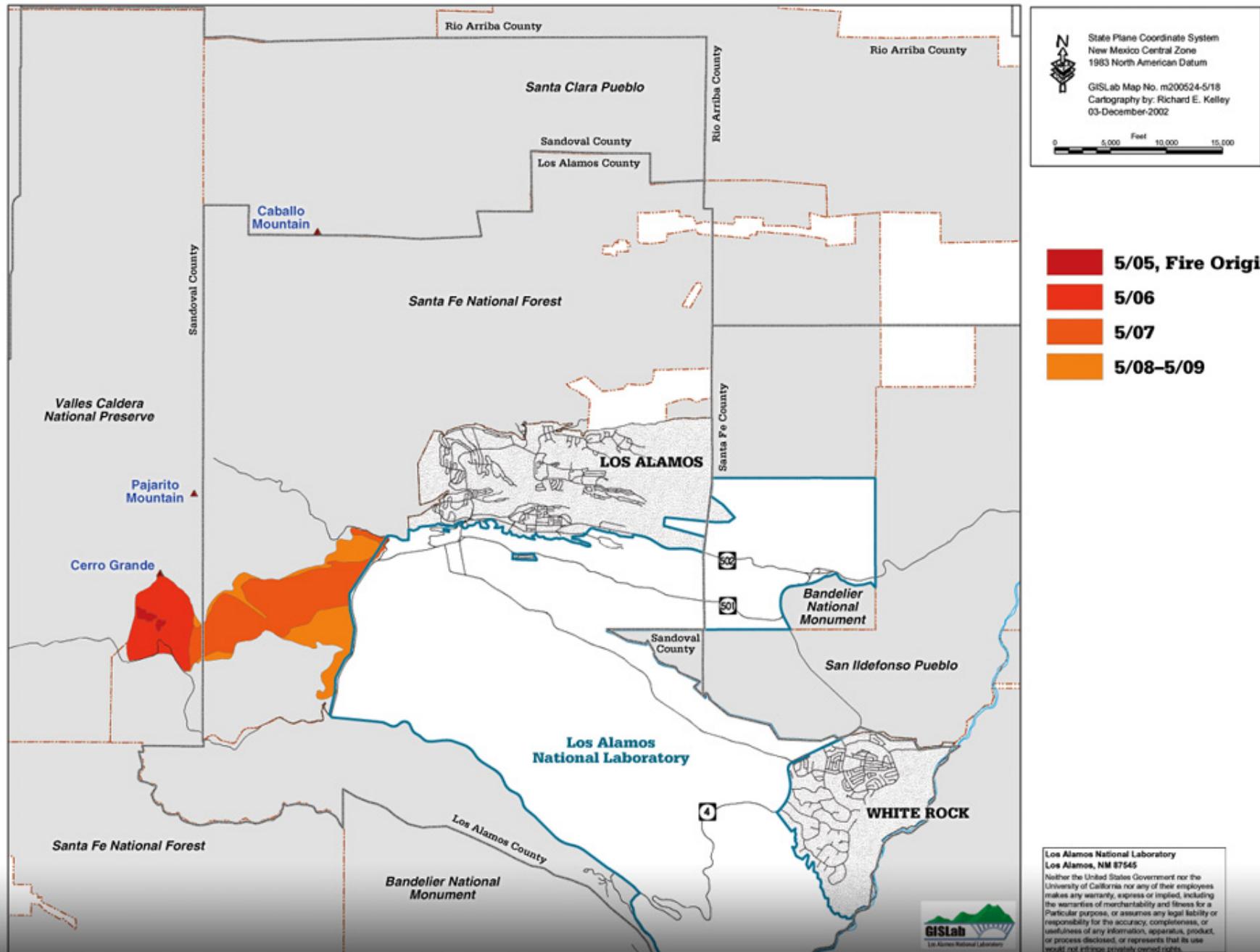
# Cerro Grande Fire Progression from May 5 – May 18, 2000



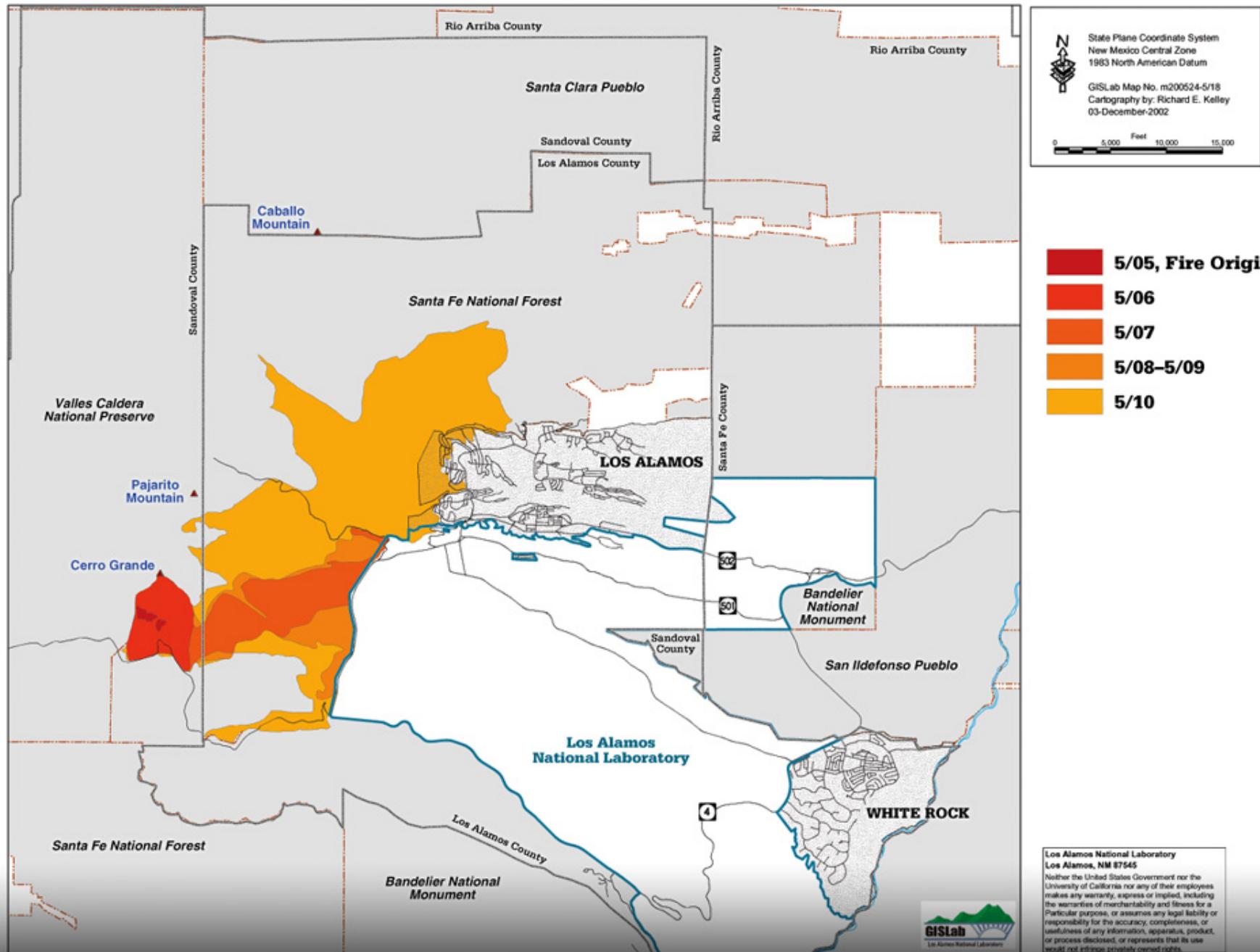
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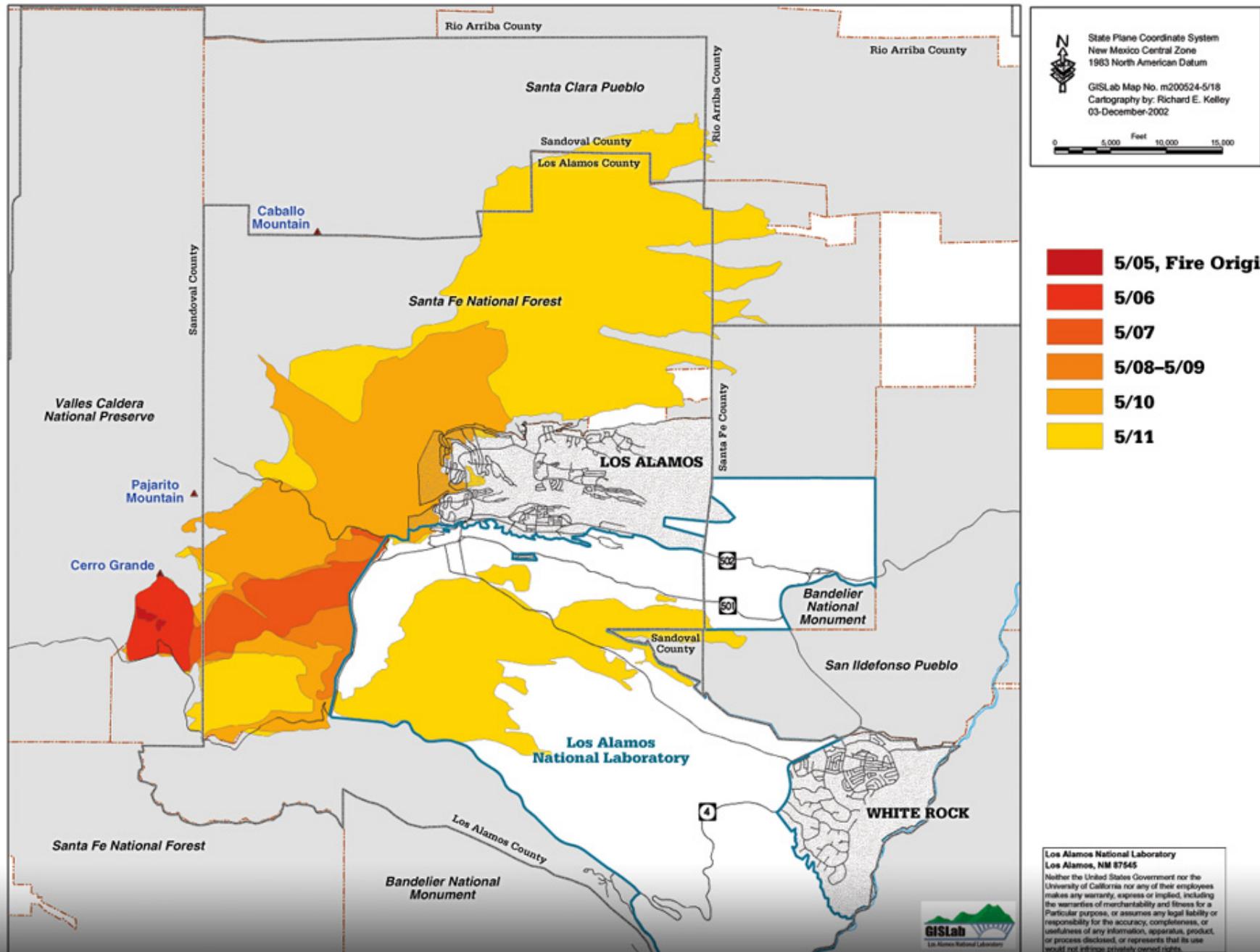
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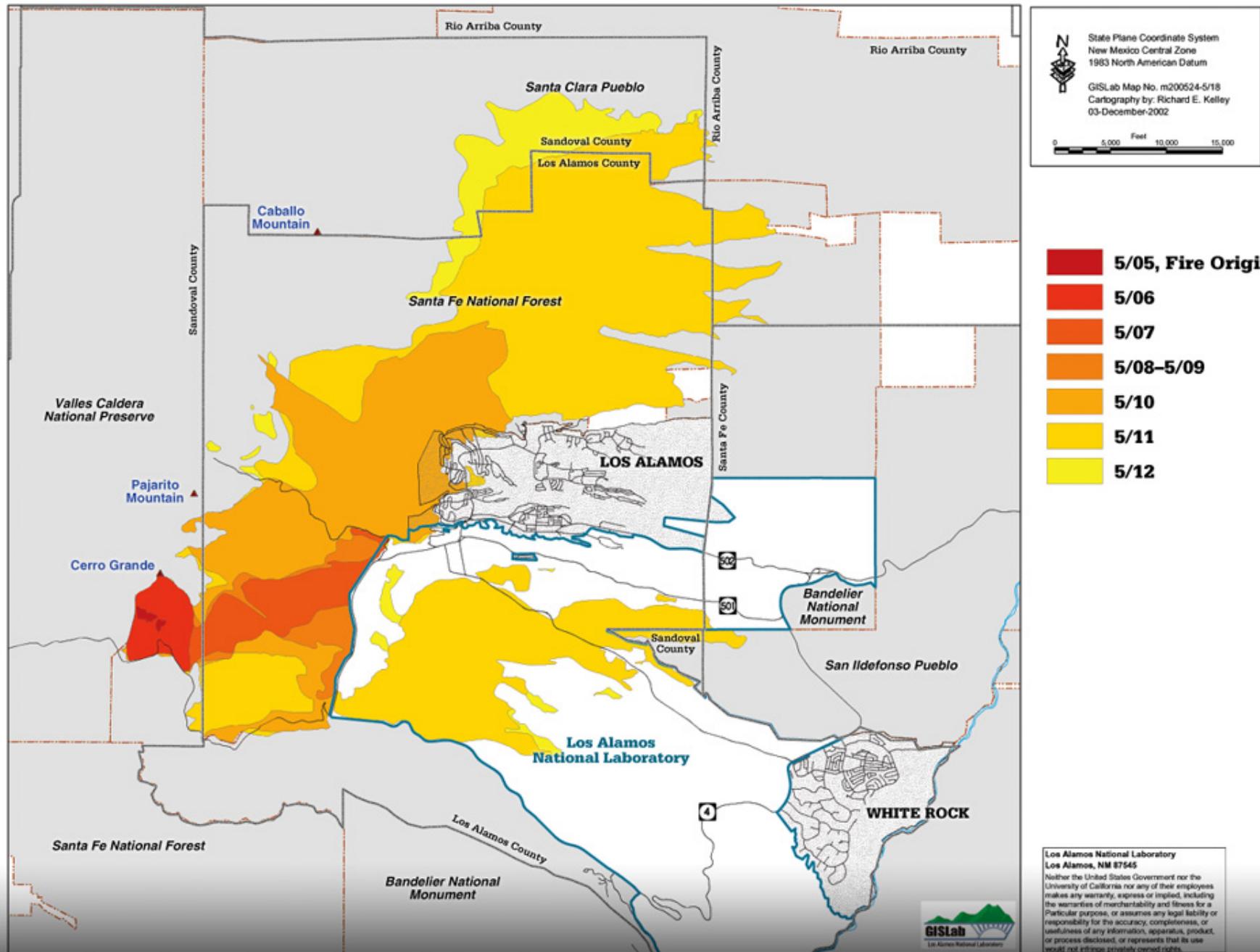
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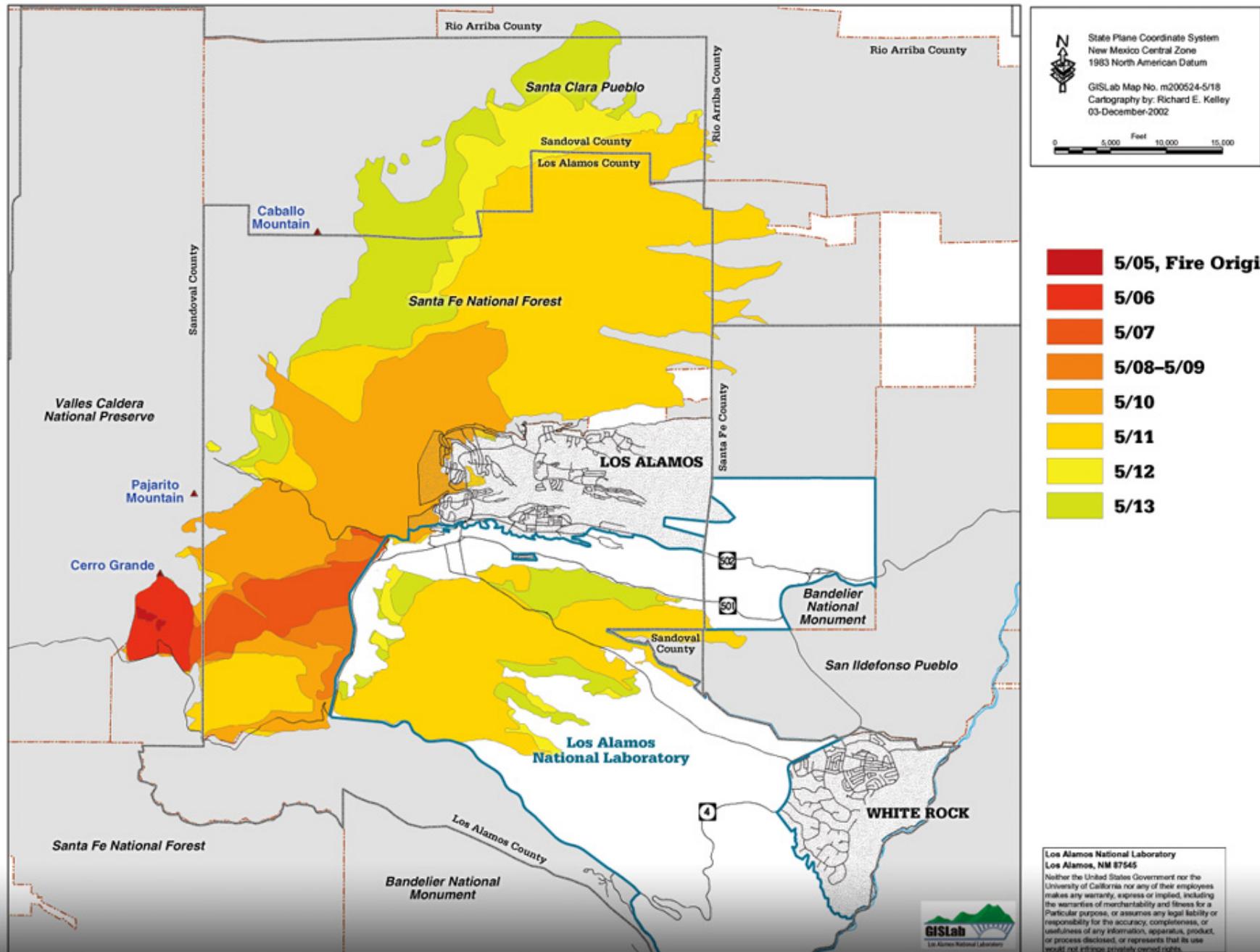
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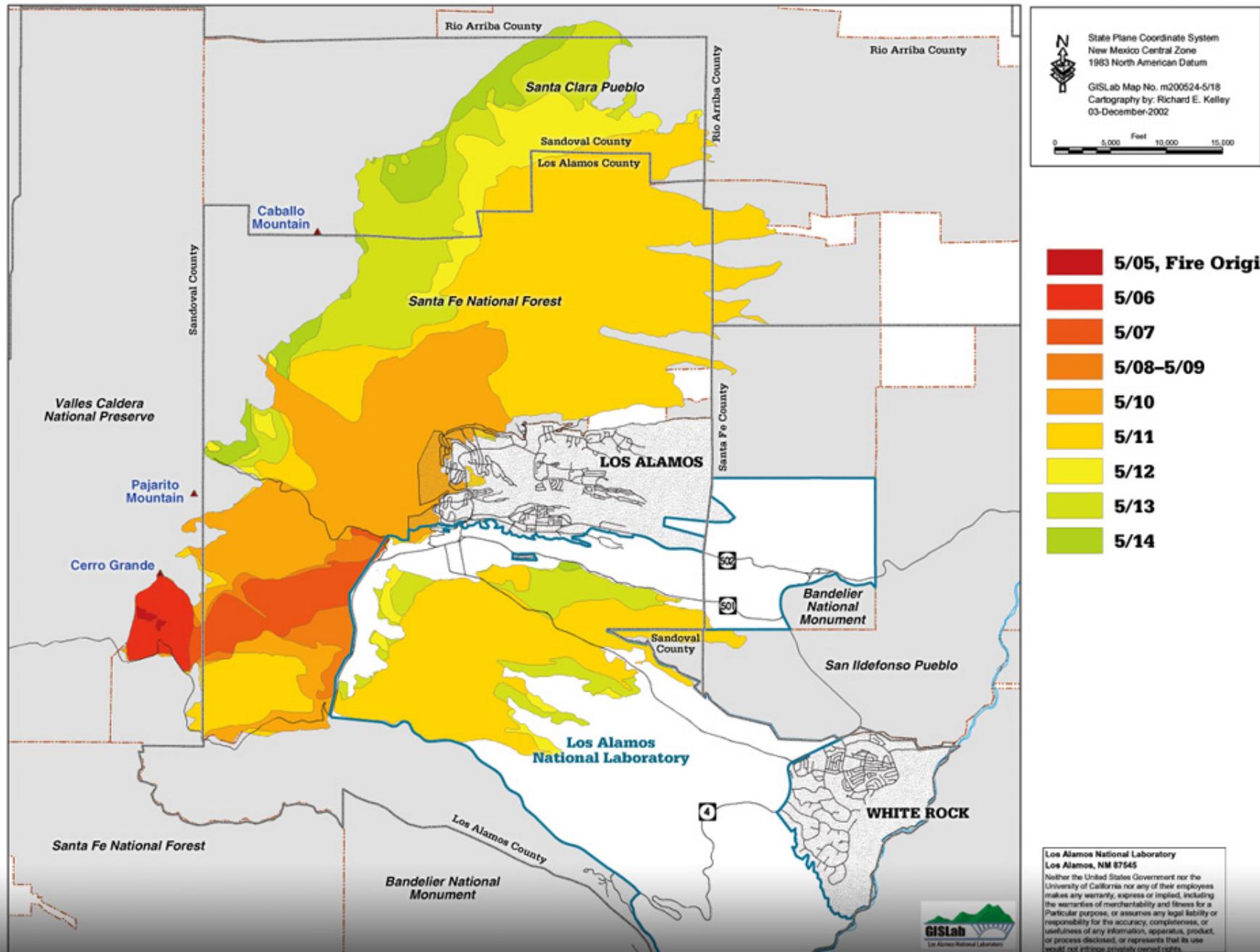
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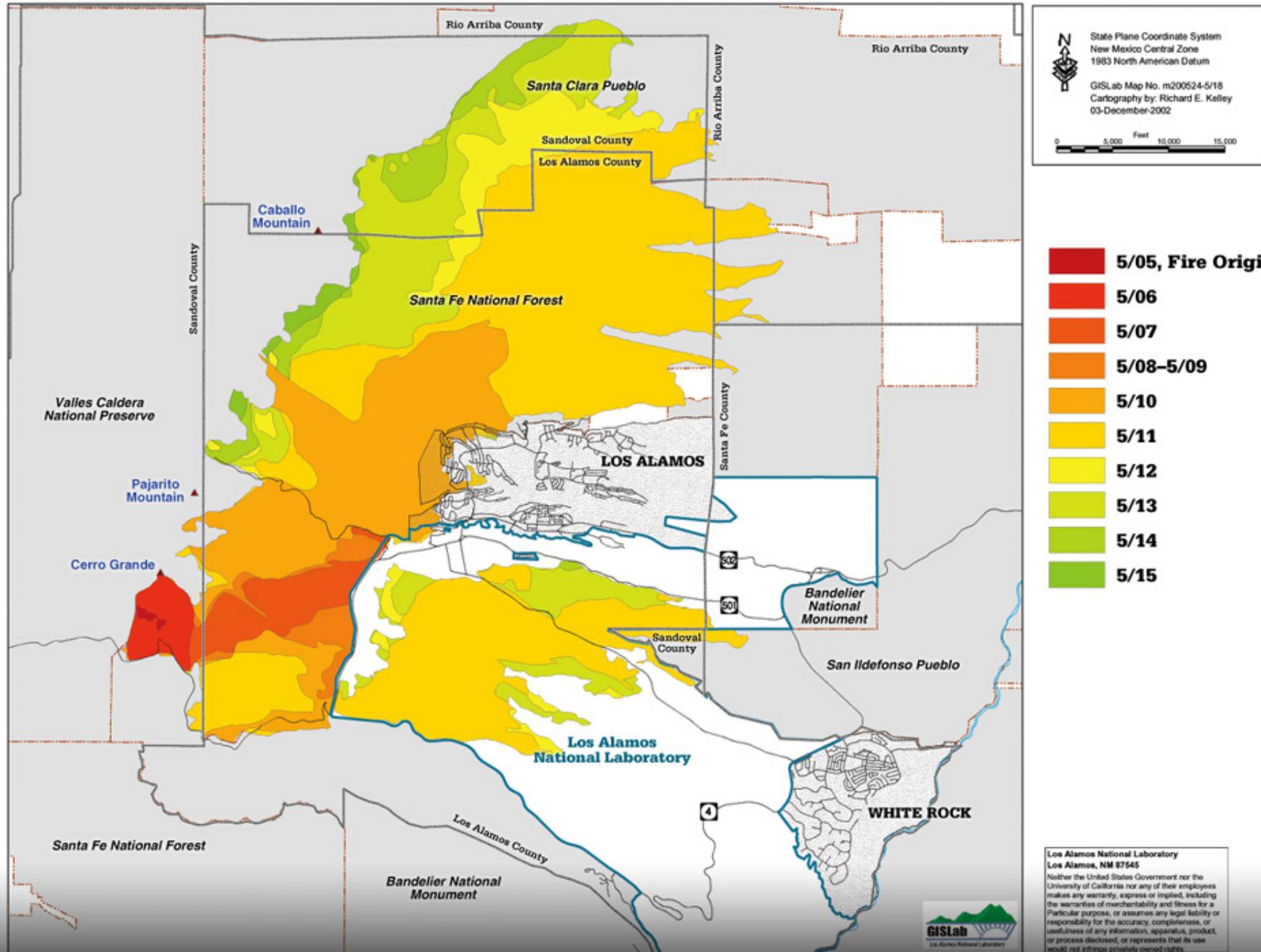
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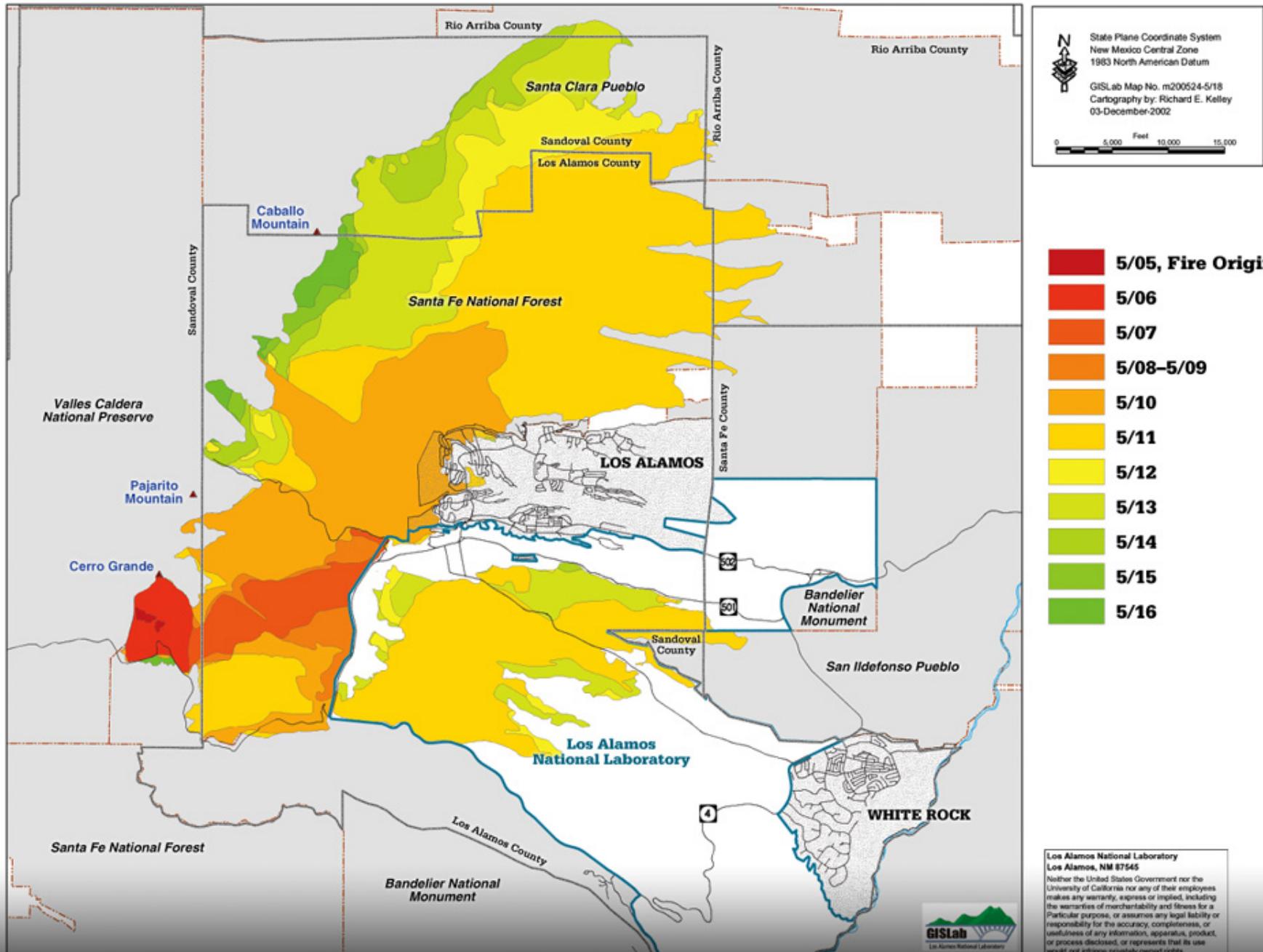
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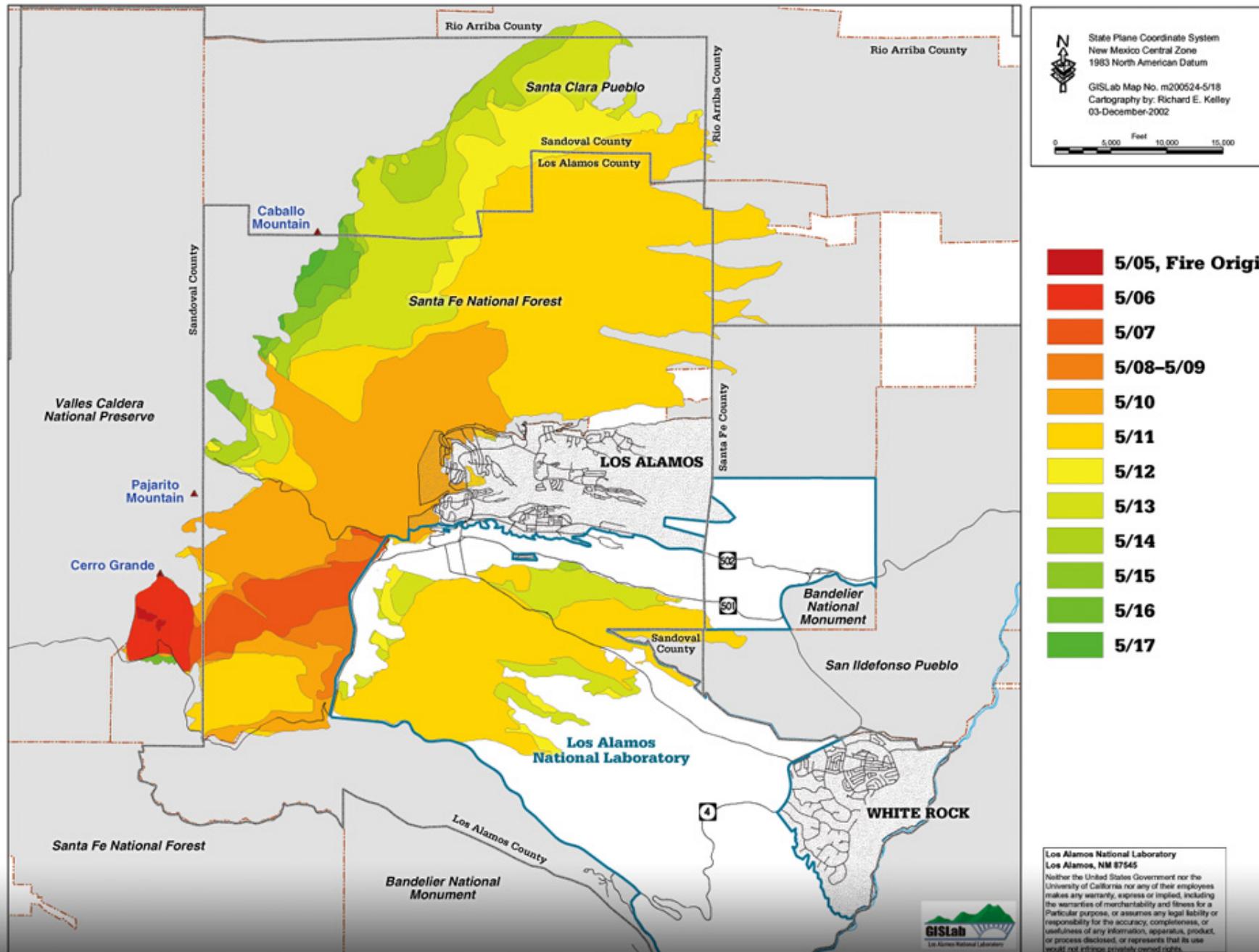
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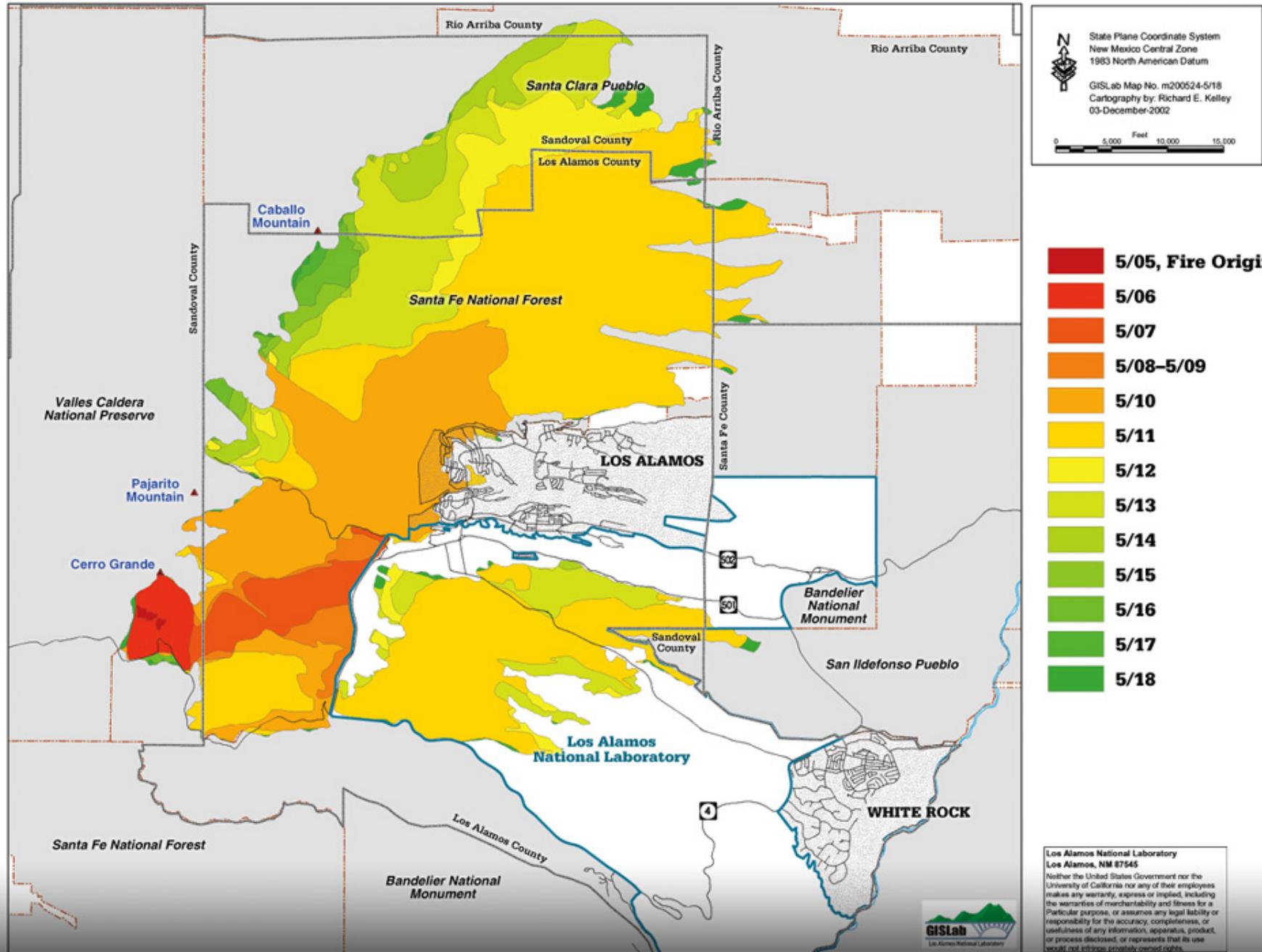
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